# Creating Mourning Dove Food Plots On Your Private Land

Many types of food plots can attract mourning doves. Many managers use a variety of food plot types and sizes for the most flexibility when it is time to prepare the sites and plant. Sunflowers are probably the most popular and effective food plot, but they have a longer growing season and require the most site preparation. Wheat also works well and needs less site preparation, but requires more planning. Millet varieties and annual weed food plots are less attractive to doves than sunflowers and wheat, but can be a great substitute if sunflowers or wheat cannot be planted in time. Generally, a food plot of 10 acres or more will attract the most doves, but plots as small as one acre can be very effective at attracting doves for smaller hunting groups. Below are specific recommendations to get the best out common food plot types.

## Sunflowers

**Selecting Seed**: The first step in planting a sunflower food plot is to select your seed variety. The most commonly planted and available varieties generally take 90 to 105 days to mature. A good deadline for planting sunflowers is May 10th; planting much earlier than May 1st means the soil temperature may not be high enough, causing the seed to rot before germinating. Planting in the May 1-10 window allows sunflower seeds to completely mature by mid-August so mourning doves get conditioned to coming to your food plot well before the hunting season starts.

**Site Preparation**: If the site is currently in grass sod then it will need to be sprayed with herbicide to kill the grass and then either disk up the sod or no-till-plant the sunflowers right into the killed sod. If the site is corn field/stalks, then disking the soil recommended, but if it is beans you should be able to plant right into the bean stubble without any cultivation.

**Fertilization:** It is best to get a general soil test to know appropriate fertilizer amounts. In lieu of soil tests, 200 lbs. per acre of 12-12-12 or the equivalent is a good estimate of what will be needed.

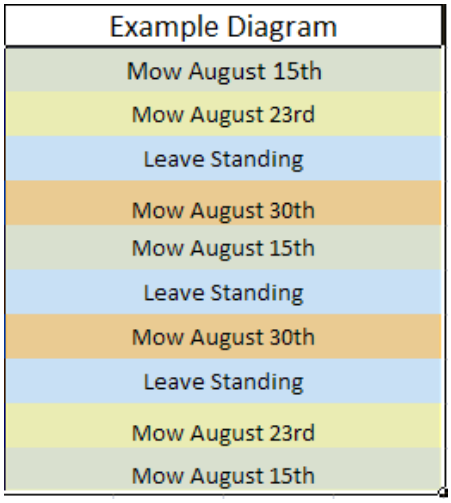
**Herbicide**: The most common herbicides for sunflowers are two pre-emergents called Treflan™ and Eptam™. The field should be disked once prior to applying a tank mix of 1 quart/acre of Treflan™ and 1 quart/acre of Eptam™ and then should be disked again immediately following, and once more two days after application. If grasses become a problem down the road when cultivation is no longer an option a post-emergent herbicide like Poast™ or Select™ could be used, although this will not be

as effective as the pre-emergent herbicide application described above. Using a tank mix of Prowl™ and Treflan™ right after planting can also be effective if you do not have time or equipment to incorporate the herbicide into the soil before planting.

**Planting Rates**: Seed should be planted 5 to 12 lbs. per acre or 14,000 to 28,000 seeds per acre. The spacing between the rows should be 30 to 36 inches. Planting rows closer than 30 inches will reduce the amount of bare ground and make landing/foraging harder for the doves. Planting them farther apart than 36 inches will increase weed competition, which will also reduce bare ground and make the food plot less attractive. A corn planter, drill, or broadcaster can be used to plant sunflowers, but a corn planter will probably be the implement that is easiest to use to provide the ideal amount of bare ground around the sunflower plants.

**Cultivation**: If you see weeds in your food plot, cultivating between the rows is important. Cultivate one to three times from the time weeds first appear and when the sunflowers reach 12 inches in height. Root damage could result if you cultivate after the sunflowers are 12 inches tall.

**Mowing**: If you decide to try to make the sunflower seeds more available by mowing them, mow as soon as they mature in early to mid August. Mow a portion of the food plot each week and increase the amount as you get closer to Sept. 1. If you have both a sickle bar mower and a bush hog, first cut the sunflowers with the sickle bar. After the seed heads have dried for a couple of days run a bush hog over the downed heads. Leave some sunflowers standing if you want concealments spots for hunters. Most managers consider a ratio of 20-25% standing sunflowers to 80-75% mowed as ideal, but some have great success by only mowing a strip around the edges of the plot. If you already have heavy dove use in early- to mid-August, consider skipping any mowing.



# Wheat

**Site Preparation**: The work needed to prepare the soil for planting wheat will depend on the existing condition of the site. If the site is currently in grass sod then it will need to be sprayed with herbicide to kill the grass. Then, either disk up the sod or no-till drill the wheat right into the killed sod. If the site has corn stalks, then disking the soil is recommended. For beans, you should be able to plant right into the bean stubble without any cultivation.

**Fetilization**: Often no fertilizer is needed for wheat planting, but to be sure, have the soil tested. In lieu of fertilizing according to a soil test, a good estimate is to apply 250 lbs of urea per acre to the site, or a 12-12-12 or the equivalent per acre.

**Herbicide**: No herbicides should be needed for winter or spring wheat food plots with the possible exception of a glyphosate burndown being used as site prep before planting.

**Planting Rates**: Wheat food plots should be planted at a rate of 1 bushel per acre and using a conventional or no-till drill. Winter wheat should be planted from August 15th through October 15th. Spring wheat should be planted from April 10 through May 5th. If winter wheat is wanted to provide forage for deer in the fall, plant before September 15th.

**Mowing/Burning/ Disking**: To ensure wheat in your food plot is available for doves, it should be disturbed in some way. You can mow, hay, burn or disk or a combination of all four. The disturbance should take place between one month and one day before the season opens. It is important not to disturb the entire field too early because if it rains, wheat seeds may germinate and doves will not eat them. If you mow, make sure not too much wheat straw is on the ground so doves can to get to the grain. If there is too much straw, burning the cut/dried straw about two weeks before the season opens is recommended. If you burn your wheat field you will want to do it on a day that is damp enough so the straw does not burn too hot and completely consume the wheat seeds. Another good method to create areas where the doves can forage easier is to windrow the mowed wheat to open up more ground. Baling some or all of the windrows and leaving the bales throughout the field is a good way to provide cover for hunters. Disking the standing wheat in some areas is also a great way to provide grain among bare soil that is very attractive to doves.

# Millet

**Selecting Seed**: Many types of millet make good dove food plots. Millet that produce smaller seeds more easily eaten by doves are probably the best choice. Some of the most popular millet for doves include browntop, foxtail, pearl, and proso. The most important factor for selecting millet will be when you can plant. Foxtail millet generally takes 90 days to mature, proso millet takes 80 days, browntop millet 70 days, and pearl millet takes 60 days. Some rarely planted types of millet may be hard to find in certain areas.

**Site Preparation**: The site preparation needed for millet planting will depend on the existing condition of the site. If the site is currently in grass sod then the site will need to be sprayed with herbicide to kill the grass and then you can either disk up the sod or you can no-till drill the millet right into the killed sod. If it is corn stalks then disking the soil is recommended, but if it is in beans you should be able to plant right into the bean stubble without any cultivation.

**Fertilization**: Fertilizer is probably more important for millet than for other food plot types mentioned above. Applying fertilizer according to a soil test is ideal, but a general recommendation would be to apply 150 lbs. per acre of 18-18-18 or the equivalent.

**Herbicide**: Apply a pre-emergent grass herbicide at the labeled rate prior to planting into disked sod or in a tank mix with the glyphosate used to kill the existing sod for a no-till planting.

**Planting Rates**: Plant 20-40 lbs. per acre at a time of year that will allow the seed to be mature at least two weeks prior to the dove season opening. Millet can be planted with a drill or broadcaster. If a drill is used then 20 to 25 lbs. per acre should suffice. For broadcast seeding use 30 to 40 lbs. per acre. Unlike sunflowers, it is unnecessary to plant millet in widely spaced rows to allow for bare ground because you will need to mow and lightly disk a majority of the millet plot to make it available for doves anyway.

**Mowing/Disking**: Mow and lightly disk portions of the millet plot after the seed matures in a manner that will make the seed gradually available over the two weeks prior to the season opening. By the time the season opens you should have mowed and lightly disked a majority of the field, leaving a few strips to be used as cover for hunters. (See the Example Diagram under sunflower mowing.)

# Annual Weeds

Probably the easiest and least expensive way to create a dove food plot is to simply disturb an area by disking or spraying to set back grass and release annual weeds. Weed species that dove find very attractive include common ragweed, foxtail, wild hemp and pigweed. Many of these species will probably mature after opening day so weed plots may provide the best opportunity after the opening week of the season. The key to attracting the doves to them is to mow or disk them after the weed seeds have matured.

Example Diagram